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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the work of Emile Durkheim and his interest in developing a science of ethics that would enable the social sciences to guide social and political policy. One of his main policy interests was education, specifically the construction of moral values. Durkheim proposed a secular approach to morality and moral education. Moral education for Durkheim consisted of the formation of three elements: (1) discipline, to be built upon a child's natural enjoyment of order; (2) autonomy, or self-determination, that assumes that morality will be followed freely if the child knows the reason behind the rule; and (3) attachment, based on the predisposition that makes a devotion to collectively shared goals possible, the child's faculty of empathy. Durkheim's approach to moral education is based on real life in three respects: (1) each aspect is based on the scientific knowledge of the child's innate predispositions rather than religious appeals; (2) the aspects take note of the real social environment that surrounds the child; and (3) the child spurns indoctrination and opts for a more realistic approach that considers the real thought processes of a growing organism. Because students come from a variety of backgrounds, there are many ways to approach the teaching of morality and many moralities. Durkheim saw science as the way to deal with the challenge of diversity. Identifying moral facts became the key to Durkheim's scientific enterprise. Once these facts were identified, a general law of ethics could be determined, and a science of ethics would be at hand. (DK)

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Snarks: Durkheim's Search for a Unifying Morality

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Introduction

It recently occurred to me that the notion of moral, or character, education has been getting more and more press since the 1980s. There are probably many reasons for this: the strengthening of the religious right, the increasing violence in society, and the perceived decline of schools, to name just a few. What concerns many moralists is the problem of keeping together, unifying, the ever diversifying society we find ourselves in. To combat these "ills," the remedy of moral education is offered as a panacea. Often, however, these remedies can be loaded with side effects. So, to understand what moral education might entail, I turned to the work of Emile Durkheim, a person famous for his "top-down" approach to the subject.

Durkheim's professional studies began with a search for single ethical principles. He felt that if we could unearth **the single** true morality, we could provide the answer to the question: "How can we hold our society together?" This question would become Durkheim's snark, the elusive entity that would charge his life's work. Throughout his life Durkheim was interested in developing a science of ethics that would enable the social sciences to guide social and political policy. One of his main policy interests was

education, specifically, the construction of moral values.

Moral Education

Durkheim proposed a secular approach to morality and moral education. He correctly points out that any present-day teaching of morality

> must give the child the sensation of reality - the source of life - from which he derives comfort and support. But a concrete, living reality is needed for this, and an abstract, artificial, logically constructed conception could not fulfil this role, even if it were built with the most rigorous logic. [1]

Morality must be anchored in real-life, not in religious dogma. Appealing to versions of Plato's Myth of Er, where toil and trouble in this lifetime will make it easier on us in the next life, have had their day. Therefore, moral education should be based on real-life.

Moral education for Durkheim consisted of the formation of three elements: discipline, autonomy, and attachment. Each of these basic character traits are made possible by innate predispositions. The primary aspect, discipline, was to be built upon a child's natural enjoyment of order. The school would institute a series of rules and regularities to promote goal oriented behavior. The hope here is that a child would learn to respect the rules in various social situations by learning to respect those of the school.

The second element, autonomy or self-determination, assumes that morality will be freely followed if the child **knows the reason** behind the rule. Autonomy is based on a child's sense of individuality. Durkheim says, "to teach

morality is neither to preach nor to indoctrinate; it is to explain." [2] Thus, if one knows why an action is right, the action will more likely be taken by virtue of enlightened assent rather than mere compliance with authority.

The third element, attachment, is based on the predisposition that makes a devotion to collectively shared goals possible, the child's faculty of empathy. A child innately sympathizes with others and wants to participate in social life. To develop this element, Durkheim recommends practice in participating in that social life. The hope is that the child will realize the "ideals of humanity" and devote him/herself to its institutions.

Durkheim's approach to moral education is based on real life in several respects. First, each aspect of the moral education program is based on the scientific knowledge of the child's innate predispositions, rather than religious appeals. Second, the aspects take note of the real social environment that surrounds the child. Durkheim wants an education that is based on the things of everyday life, not mere words. [3] Third, Durkheim spurns indoctrination and instead opts for a more realistic approach that considers the real thought processes of a growing organism. Thus, given that students come from a variety of backgrounds into the classroom, there are many ways to approach the teaching of morality. Indeed, there may be many moralities to be contended with. Such multiplicity poses a real challenge to any plan of moral education. Durkheim saw science as the way

to deal with that challenge.

Morality as Science

Identifying moral facts became the key to Durkheim's scientific enterprise. Once these facts were identified, a general law of ethics could be determined and a science of ethics would be at hand. In 1893, Durkheim wrote,

> Before discovering a summarizing formula, the facts must be analyzed, their qualities described, their functions determined, their causes sought out; and only by comparing the results of all these special studies shall we be able to extract the common characteristics of all moral rules, the constitutive properties of the law of ethics. [4]

Once moral laws were identified, there could be no question about the fundamental unity of morality. So, right from the start Durkheim's thoughts about morality are naturalistic as well as monolithic. That is, moral facts are external to individuals and seem to be singular in their origin and meaning.

Moral facts act as constraints on people's behavior. They form an inflexible set of prescriptions to be followed. This conception of the rigidity of rules can be seen even as late as 1902 when Durkheim stated, "A rule, indeed, is not only an habitual means of acting; it is above all, **an obligatory means of acting.**" [5] Indeed, a key term in Durkheim's early philosophy was "constraint." Lukes points out, "it seems clear that Durkheim's paradigm sense of 'constraint' is the exercise of authority, backed by sanctions, to get individuals to conform to rules." [6]

Lukes observes that after The Rules of Sociological Method (1895), Durkheim "ceased to stress the criterion of 'constraint.'" [7] The emphasis of Durkheim's inquiry began to change from an externalization of rules to more of an internalization of rules. The idea of constraint became too narrow a concept for the theory that we see in Moral Education (1902). The idea of duty (an external constraint) was pushed to one side as the concept of desirability made its way into Durkheim's new sociology.

Desirability is an internalization of norms. Duty is merely an external set of rules. Although a deontological set of rules is an important aspect of morality, another set of rules creates moral behavior: internalized values. Authoritarian duty can be an important aspect of moral behavior, but what Durkheim came to understand was that internalized rules of conduct are often more powerful in producing behavior. Durkheim explains, "Something of the nature of duty is found in the desirability of morality." [8] Morality, then, is not only the rule, but also the desire to follow that rule. This is why proper moral education is so important: a list of rules must be accompanied by a set of reasons.

Morality as Speculation

Gradually, Durkheim's dream of a science of ethics gave way and morality returned to the speculative (a situation he wished to avoid earlier on). [9] Certainly once internal

states such as desire are brought into the picture, the scientific nature of the inquiry begins to wane. Indeed, by 1904, Durkheim seems to have abandoned his purely scientific quest for a unifying morality.

> Morality is distinguished by a religious characteristic which places it outside the bounds of truly scientific thought or, in other words, free thought. [10]

What, then, has ethics come to in Durkheim's mind? He answers:

> [Morality] is quite simply a way of co-ordinating as rationally as possible the ideas and sentiments which comprise the moral conscience of a **particular period**. [11]

The moralist is relegated to the position of "mirror of his time." Morality is no longer a monolithic stone, but is made up of heterogeneous elements, the present and past notions that constitute an ethical milieu. A relativity begins to creep in, but other notions that are descriptive of a moral unity also appear. The notion that morality coordinates the ideas of a particular period in some sense reveals that Durkheim has not given up his hunt for the snark: a unifying morality.

As Durkheim's theory matured, he became more attracted to a less rigid view of moral realities. Hall points out,

> Durkheim's later ethical thought was not a unified theory based upon a single principle like his earlier theory, but rather a more loosely formulated collection of ideas that is better characterized as a general perspective than an explicit theory. [12]

Indeed, in the final days of his life, somewhere between March and September 1917, Durkheim wrote, "Moral speculation, which we first thought was scientific in nature, has thus

practical aims too." [13] In opposition to Hall, Durkheim does not completely give up his idea of a scientific ethics. Different societies indeed have their own moral realities, and there may be no way to find a pure ethical connection between them. But the scientific pursuit does not have to be completely abandoned, nor does the speculative. The pursuit of ethics, the content of the moral education curriculum, and a Durkheimian unifying moral system can be fulfilled by his concept of a moral ideal.

The Moral Ideal

The concept of the moral ideal emerges by 1917 and saves various aspects of Durkheim's theories about ethics and moral education. The moral ideal is a synthesis of science (past and present) and speculation (future). The scientific aspect of the moral ideal derives from that fact that it is worked out by philosophers. As Durkheim says, "He gives reasons." [14] Although the ethicist is just an individual, he is also a social being with the general welfare in view. The ethicist speculates as to what might be the best state of affairs to strive for and sets this down as an ideal which (hopefully) shapes behavior. Accepting a type of relativism, Durkheim explains,

> Every morality, no matter what it is, has its ideal. Therefore, the morality to which men subscribe at each moment of history has its ideal which is embodied in the institutions, traditions and precepts which generally govern behavior. [15]

A moral ideal is no longer fixed, instead, it can change.

This does not imply an "anything goes" morality. Since the moralist works out the reasons for ideals and actions, this differentiates them from the spontaneous judgements of the average Joe. Durkheim was not explicit on how such calculations were to be done, but they had to consider the future of society. Durkheim emerges as a relativist, but this does not condemn him to mere moral speculation and complete atomistic relativism. Durkheim's interest in a moral order remained to his final days.

Conclusion

We have seen two things going on here: (a) a prescription for moral education and (b) a way to fill that prescription via a moral ideal in the face of a growing relativism on Durkheim's part. But, if moralities are relative, who has the right to compose a curriculum? Where are the boundaries of societal sovereignty to be drawn?

One is compelled to remind would-be moral educators that surrounding the child, before school starts and during his/her days at that institution, there are institutions competing for that child's devotion. Indeed, many of these institutions will satisfy the predispositions for a child's need for order, individuality, and social life. Institutions such as communities, families, and gangs all have their "collected habit structures." All are ready to hand down their morality to the young. What sometimes happens is that the school's rival institutions are more persuasive.

Yet Durkheim does not advocate teaching a "morality of the streets." However, such a morality is exactly what is being produced by the social reality of many school children. So, according to Durkheim's theory, that social reality is where any moral education will have to begin. On one hand, we have a theory of moral education that tells us that we must begin with the child's reality. This idea is consistent with a great many of our educational theories, e.g., John Dewey and a host of others. On the other hand, what the environment is producing is unacceptable for the majority of society. [16] So what is to be done?

A greater vision of society that will engender a view of shared moral objectives needs to be emphasized. Community cohesion, tolerance, cooperation, and a multi-cultural philosophy are just some of the elements that might be tried to unify us in the face of diversity. Even after all this discussion, it still seems possible to unify diverse peoples by a moral ideal without destroying the moral order of their respective communities. Durkheim's quest has brought us here, but there are many details to fill in. Although his project was flawed, there is still hope that it may come to some fruition. The hunt for the snark continues. Let us continue the search.

NOTES

1 - Emile Durkheim, Durkheim: essays on morals and education, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 135.
2 - Emile Durkheim, Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1961, p. 120.
3 - Durkheim, Durkheim: essays, p. 114.
4 - Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1933, pp. 418-9.
5 - Ibid., p. 4.
6 - Lukes, p. 13.
7 - Ibid.
8 - Robert Nisbet, The Sociology of Emile Durkheim, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 193. Note: this was quoted from Durkheim's Sociology and Philosophy, p. 36.
9 - See: Durkheim, Division of Labor, p. 423.
10- Durkheim, Durkheim: essays, p. 30.
11- Ibid., my emphasis.
12- Robert T. Hall, Emile Durkheim: Ethics and the Sociology of Morals, New York: Greenwood Press, p. 183.
13- Durkheim, Durkheim: essays, p. 81.
14- Ibid., p. 80.
15- Durkheim, Durkheim: essays, p. 81.
16- See: The Gallop Poll in Kappan, October, 1993.